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SUBJECT: SECURITY CONCERNS IN BASRA RESURFACE DUE TO SOFA VOTE

REF: A) BAGHDAD 003503; B) BASRAH 00085

CLASSIFIED BY: Ramon Negron, Director, Regional Embassy Office
Basrah, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: Sadrist and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) contacts of the Regional Embassy Office (REO) predict a rise in violence in Basra if the SOFA is approved by the Council of Representatives. While the security situation has dramatically improved since Operation Charge-of-the-Knights (COK) and continues to be stable, rhetoric from Muqtada al-Sadr against Coalition Forces (CF) has renewed concerns that the security environment may become unstable once again. One Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) leader is advising REO personnel to stay out of the city until mid-December. Despite the potential for increased violence, the local ISF commander is confident that the situation is well under control. End summary.

¶2. (S) Sheikh Mohammad al-Faraji, who identifies himself as the OMS leader of five southern provinces (reftel A), informed the REO on November 16 that he expects random attacks against CF to begin immediately following the announcement of a SOFA between Iraq and the US. Faraji, who claims to have authority over Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) in Basra, is concerned that many JAM members will act individually, in spite of his instructions to refrain from violence until ordered. Faraji said he does not control JAM Special Groups and Al-Asa'ib (AAH) which receive their orders directly from OMS. (Comment: All CF evidence suggests that AAH takes its orders from Akram al-Ka'bi, who has broken away from OMS and is no longer part of its structure. Al-Ka'bi is currently participating in reconciliation negotiations with Iraqi Government advisors close to the Prime Minister. End comment.)

¶3. (S) According to Faraji, JAM members in Basra are already poised to attack. He further explained that he denies daily requests for permission to engage CF targets. He related one incident where an American PRT member was targeted but the mission was aborted when Faraji denied the request to fire.

¶4. (S) Faraji specifically warned the REO to minimize movements in Basra between November 26 -- the date he expects SOFA passage -- and December 15. He anticipates random attacks but believes he will be able to convince rogue JAM elements to honor his cease fire order within three weeks.

¶5. (S) Faraji's prediction of violence was echoed by Major General Mohammad Jawad Huwaydi in a meeting at the Basra Operations Command on November 17. General Mohammad acknowledged that many JAM elements had returned to the city and believed that a violent response to approval of the SOFA was a strong likelihood. The General was confident, however, that the violence would be kept to a minimum. Although admitting that problems remain within the Iraqi Police (IP), he acknowledged that they were improving and he was satisfied with the overall performance of the ISF. He pointed out that the 14th Division (Iraqi Army) regularly conducts cordon and search operations and gave assurance that the ISF have complete control of the city. Mohammad said arrests had been on the rise and the ISF had

detained 350 people on security-related charges over the past two weeks.

¶ 6. (S) Comment: Sheikh Faraji is both a Sadrist and a nationalist; his cooperation with the REO is clearly aimed at boosting his own power within Sadrist circles and countering Iranian influence among his followers in the region. In the past, he has requested US assistance in promoting an Arab Shi'a spiritual leader to rival Iranian religious power in Najaf. Recently, he asked for REO assistance in finding jobs for over 750 people fired by the government during COK for their OMS or JAM connections. Although how much power he has within OMS is unclear, his correct description of a specific PRT member's movements into Basra on a particular day tends to lend him some credibility.

¶ 7. (S) Comment continued: ISF have continued to improve over the past few months. The opening of a Basra Provincial Joint Operations Center (reftel B) on November 20 will enhance their effectiveness. Given JAM's weakened state, lack of funds, and current unpopularity, it is difficult to imagine that an increase in coordinated attacks or even large-scale violence against CF could be sustained over time.

NEGRON